

Book Review / Compte rendu

Altbach, Philip G. (2016). *Global perspectives on higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pages: 352. Price: \$34.95 USD (paper).

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Global perspectives on higher education is a testament of Philip Altbach's research over the past 50 years on comparative higher education. The chapters in this book stem from his life's work at the Comparative Education Center (SUNY Buffalo) and the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College; the eighteen chapters are written in a straightforward manner for higher educators. The important term "globalization," a key concept in Altbach's work, is defined as the increased integration of the world economy, dependent upon innovation and technology. An early example is Portuguese exploration in the 15th century, followed by Britain's creation of a globe-spanning empire. Fast forward to the 21st century, with Internet connectivity and the development of online courses, degree programs and virtual academic institutions, and learning and accreditation issues in higher education become exacerbated. Into this pot is thrown the concept of the *massification* of higher education – expanding access from a small percentage of the traditional age group of students to half the relevant age group – and the pot begins to boil. Altbach speaks of the dramatic implications: a growing private sector, a deterioration in the quality of education, more distance education, increased efforts to measure academic productivity, attempts to assure quality, differentiated academic institutions with varied missions, and an industry of student mobility.

"The global context" is the linking concept for the first set of chapters. World demographics is the driving force for postsecondary development and reform. With the expansion of student numbers comes a more varied social base and mix of students, intensified by internationalization of higher education with most movement of students being from south to north. English as the dominant language of scientific communication portends an increase in its usage in higher education, and at the same time creates a hierarchy and in some instances an assault on national culture and identity. The trend in the academic profession is to become more internationally oriented and diversified and subject

to varied employment contracts. A growing tension between universities in the center and those on the periphery is heightened by the ranking of academic institutions and degree programs. At the same time the increase in private higher education, due largely to the withdrawal of funding on the part of governments, means less quality assurance as the private sector absorbs the demand but operates on a for-profit basis. The change in government thinking to viewing higher education as a private rather than a public good means that “users” – students and their families – are increasingly expected to pay for postsecondary education. In some countries, particularly in Western Europe, a commitment to increased access has kept fees down, but this has resulted in overcrowding and deterioration in conditions of study.

In a chapter devoted to the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China), Altbach notes that these countries have transitional academic systems: they are dealing with rapid expansion while at the same time building world-class research universities at the top of each national system. To some extent they are adopting Western academic and organizational ideas, but the greatest challenge for Brazil, India and China lies in finding places for the age cohort when government expenditure in education and in research is low compared to wealthier nations. Training and paying the academic profession, and providing a degree of institutional autonomy are also major challenges. A final note on internationalization after the Cold War and in the midst of current global conflicts leaves the reader with the question of the extent to which fundamentalist tendencies and resurgent nationalism will harm global higher education.

In the second set of chapters, headed “The implications of globalization,” Altbach begins with realities in the unequal but interdependent world of the 21st century. International inequalities are reinforced when most research intensive universities are in the US, where not only do they receive the lion’s share of research funds, but attract paying graduate students from China and India who may constitute a brain drain from their own countries. *Multinationalism* describes programs or institutions located in one country but offering degrees in other countries. Business administration, especially the MBA degree, exemplifies the global dominance of English-speaking academic systems. Within a free-trade context, profit motivates both suppliers of education and students; international programs charge higher fees, and students pay these high fees in order to access programs otherwise unavailable. The “buying” countries tend to be Asian and Latin-American middle income countries. Saudi Arabia is establishing new universities to serve the Middle East, while Australia has a branch campus in Vietnam. Canada is referenced for its Canadian International Management Institute agreement with China and support for the Al-Ahram University in Egypt.

A critical chapter on the globalization of university rankings proceeds from who uses rankings: (1) the public, who want guidance on where to study; (2) universities, to benchmark against other institutions and systems; and (3) government policymakers, to determine the allocation of resources. Altbach observes that teaching is virtually ignored in the rankings, although teacher-student ratios, numbers of staff with PhDs, and reputation are used as proxies. The rankings focus on research productivity using citation analysis and funding, and favor research in the hard sciences, and universities that function in English, as most journals are in English, thus reinforcing the hegemony of the English language in higher education.

“Centers and peripheries,” the third set of chapters, contains arguments for how universities located in countries at different levels of development relate to each other and, in particular, the pressures for universities in developing countries to contribute directly to national development while participating in the international system. Third world universities are peripheral and dependent on foreign institutions in many respects, while being central to the local society, as they produce the elite of the country. There, professors often serve in high government positions. In a chapter on research universities in developing countries, Altbach notes their high cost and the attendant challenges of funding, competition and commercialization. How feasible are academic freedom and meritocracy in countries where corruption and governments control academic life?

The final two sets of chapters in the book deal with “Comparative perspectives” on higher education and “Teachers and students.” A major issue is academic freedom. Should it be defined broadly – giving the professoriate political freedom in addition to freedom to teach without external control in one’s area of expertise, and freedom for students to learn? The history of limits to academic freedom extends from religious and political control to *managerialism* in today’s university. The destruction of the academic system in China from 1966 to 1976 during the Cultural Revolution is a potent example: contemporary higher education in China is organized with Communist Party administration, and research is still often done separately in Academies.

Regarding students in international higher education, China and India are the top two exporters of students, sending almost half the world’s international students. As for teachers, comparison of academic salaries shows Russia and China at the bottom of the hierarchy while South Africa and Canada are at the top. Altbach points out that in most countries, academics must supplement their salaries with teaching overloads, nonacademic work, or teaching in multiple institutions. There are fewer tenured appointments, but contract employees tend to be renewed as a matter of course.

Student political activism, the final topic, addresses who the activists are and why they tend to be successful in developing countries. Activist leaders are likely to study in the social sciences, come from more affluent, well-educated families, earn good grades themselves, and often come from minority groups. Their success in developing countries is in part due to the country’s acceptance of student political leadership, the students’ sense of being an incipient elite, their tendency to speak for the broader population, and their access to powerful segments of society.

In sum, the issues treated in this book are wide reaching and cause for thought for higher educators. 🍁